

Individual Parts May Be Salvaged

Carol Peters

for Susan Laughter Meyers
1945-2017

Going is less, Sister, long gone from you, yet
We who take all with us, leave not much behind —
Busy missing you — I have not tasted Spring —
Should there be other Aprils, We will perhaps dine —

— Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert Dickinson

Charleston South Carolina
2018

Owl

Eyes of liquid marble stare
from a white face, heart shaped.
A thin line gentles the brow's
eminence, dies to a horned beak,
speckled shoulders, cream torso,
feathers flare over curled feet.
Unwatched, the owl probes the night.
Great wings stroke a sweet way
to end at a pane of glass,
fall to flowers, to green grass —
the way sweet Susan, struck, fell,
an unseen wall her end as well —
flat plane, Euclidian light.

A Dead Angel

lies in mesquite, a golden mesh
on thin red branches,
her wings thin as spider casts.
Ants & beetles climb bark & leaves
to reach reddish hairs curled at her chin.
Unglazed clay clings to her skin. Crows & coyotes
tear away chunks that heal a moment after.
She hums from the middle of her throat,
fingers air, sketches a rainstorm.
Her footprint casts a concrete shell.
Fishers cast luminous lines to tether her tighter.
Fabricate, implicate, complicate.
Sunken gut, ribbed torso, muscled limbs.
Non-species, an other than.
Why does an angel take human form?
Why not a meerkat, moon jelly?
What we yearn for most:
wings & a shining demeanor,
call & response to a central reason,
not free but moral will,
a road past kill.

Sea Lion at Dog Beach

The dogs find the body first,
fin over teakettle tumbled by surf
up the tide line onto the beach
of kelp-strewn sand, pale meat
where seafaring creatures
chewed at the drowned hide,
nothing remains of the head, no eyes,
fins limp & folded, backwash
lifts & swirls the shrinking corpse
away from the nuzzling dogs,
their owners' shouts, bathers gawking
beside, so close, so raw.

Thunder More Resonant

strikes

the body, a wrapped & ribboned rabbiting box

storm outside rehoused

ongoing, retriggered

no sign it will stop

perhaps a rabbit's inside

a famine of rabbits

pottage of chicks

one Buddhist carries the woman across the ford

another carries her forever

capsule shudders, rocks

the din makes it hard to do ought else

thumpitude

pitch batter clatter yaw

phenomena prefer to be exhausted

play to the rim

of flat mother earth

interruption is denial

pink streaks connect blue flagons

penitent shudders of constriction

talionic justice

banditry

plotting

disguise

Sea Glass

Collecting sea glass, high tide,
I race toward the rocks, away from swash
until I'm lost. The swash rises past my knees.
I keep to my feet, I sway, I wait, then peer
at backwash for minuscule bits
of orange & red, green & blue, pearlescent
white, shells worn thin as mica, rocks
blotched & streaked, fossilled & pitted, hollowed
& cored. Next I know a streaking wave
sideswipes a second seeker, bloodied
on gravel-strewn sand, muscled by forces
beyond her ken, she rues her salty camera
& phone. *We come from Nevada*, she says,
we have nothing like this at home.

2 August

Dear Susan,

Not a day goes by. You haven't emailed since June 17th. Your last twitter poem posted on June 20th. I suppose you're awfully busy. I continue my side of our correspondence as always. I suppose you'd find me grim. I am. Nonetheless, I'm not idle. A week ago I traded in my Subaru for a Toyota Prius 2. I wanted the safety features. As if safety could be found in a car. Drove a whopping 120 miles in this first week, & the gas gauge is down by one sixteenth. At this rate, I'll buy gas six times a year. Actually, some days, I am idle, as today, I woke up feeling like sludge. Tova raises my pulse, but I still find it difficult to smile. She's putting up with me. I suppose she thinks I'll recover. A woman in the old folks home next door moans for help for at least an hour every day. I don't bother. I'm reading Augustine's *Confessions*, & a self-help book by a Buddhist hospice director, & Kinsey Millhone novels. She's a soft-hearted hard-ass P.I. I don't try to figure out whodunit. I spend my evenings alone with her. Write if you can.

Love,

Carol

Plainsong

The penny dropped
falls into silence
where I fail for
a long time,
copper greening
at the bottom of
an empty vase.
What fits me alone,
what to claim
what to carry
into wilderness —
a cliff, a ridge,
a blind corner,
antlers downslope,
a silver fox,
a low window,
loaves torn by
sly invaders.
Displaced cats
flee to high places.
Feral we pace.
One night a fiddle
ad-libs a dance.
Snakes & owls
outside cracked glass
stare.

Canto

Which circle caters to the homeless,
you who last night slept
outside my window, pissed

my fence before folding your tarp qua
bed, shouldered your garbage bag —
black on black except for the orange

scarf around your neck. Yes, I hid snug
behind drapes
as you gathered your rags

& started down the asphalt grade
toward morning, what morning brings to
your state. Yes, this is my delayed

sympathy now that I've 911'ed
& texted the photo
I snapped through the window —

yours could be the back of anyone, no
fringe of the signature scarf, no face.
No,

you're traveling to some designated space —
its devils, torments, grace.

Does Grass Sing in Nahuatl?

anyone who could not speak Nahuatl was a non-human
— *Wade Davis*

grass grows

is rained on

flattened by cows

burned brown

frosted

grass cut & braided makes a wig

a basket for fresh-picked berries

grass is a name

& knowing the word *plant* & the concept of taxonomy

you can draw the hierarchy of

living things

plants

grass

other branches

also sing

WHRB

Silver mike in a soundproof booth
above side-by-side turntables
screwed to a plywood bench.
A tight space. While one song plays
to the live feed I unsleeve a fresh
LP, guide the spindle through
the center hole. My anti-static brush
sweeps the grooves. I choose the cut, set
the needle, rotate round to the first sound,
& when one last note fades, I flip
a knob to swap the feed, toggle a switch
to start the new song, grade my segue.
One-girl DJ, now & again
I name artists, bands. Mostly I spin.

Fool's Canzone

we are fools
for thinking we can live
new day, new page, new stanza — fools
you're a fool, I'm a fool, both fools
at our age to want
ship of, game of, gown & cap of fools
pendejo, she says, what fools
to think someone might listen to
your remnant self, listen to
someone who fools
herself by making every new day a new song
poesis, *ποίησις*, making song

word machine singing a song
oh merry band of fools
whistle the hemi semi demi quavers of our song
hum & dance the color of morning song
as long as we both shall live
bluebird song
purple martin song
no matter how much we want
thou shalt not want
as long as we dance & sing our song
tip an ear, bend a knee to listen to
rain on light, oh bard, listen to

stirrings of beasts at night, listen to
dusk for owl's sacred song
when sleep won't come listen to
sacred om listened to
by sager fools
than I — Chinese poets listened to

jars of wine down to the lees, listened to
rivers & stars to learn to live
without the means to live
to make words we still listen to
about want
how what we want

surpasses even what gods who have everything want
sounds of the earth they listen to
pedestrian commotion they want
mortal creatures they want
to touch, to taste, to transform into song
chaste laurel Apollo wants
gadfly-pestered heifer Zeus wants
idle shepherds chortle & fart at such fools
for love, fools
pursuing what they think they want
this morning's gold dawn is where I live
bacon, fresh egg from a live

chicken, bushes alive
with small brown birds that want
no more than seeds to live
can mere words suffice for the rest of my life to live
by? listening to
the child who sings to live
listening to her sing the days she lives
whatever fills her head is song
not carrying a tune makes no difference to her song
the middle of her singing is where I live
no fools
like old fools

machinations of blind listening fools
we write our poems to live
the only way we want
every morning wake to listen to
new song

Laud Our Bard

Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind

— *Wade Davis*

Be drawn to places words go
when you're idling along in low
deep in a stranger's gullet,
cadence of wings, unpredictable beat
of echo, a shriek, hum, a howl
creates fandangles
poets wangle from blue
from cousins & curve balls. You
brick your own roads, scribble words
that flounder & fly, rhyme & count,
arabesque sashay & flounce
sideways backward forward
without ever a thought to repent
of frenzy, a lover's first defense.

Fixed Featureless Splendor

— *an Octavio Paz cento*

there are no dead, there is only death, our mother
she who was buried with open eyes
a lugubrious, lascivious clatter of heels
the flash of a skirt
a riddle shaped like an hourglass
a fluttering of opaque conjurations
a marching battalion of sparks
the sun's dagger dances on your warrior breast
flows through your shape, if fire is water
you are a diaphanous drop
more real than the body you inhabit
your body is the trace of your body

the fig tree was a goddess, the mother
the green hug of innumerable limbs
burnt by autumn, transfigured by autumn's light
it rises through diaphanous spaces
chases ghosts, stalks reflections
you light up within, you are blind stone
you kneading trough of bones
who flows through the whiskers of autumn
hands of rain darkened by birds, holiness
at the edge of a precipice of looks
I hear you throb in the shadow
a body caressing itself, tearing itself apart

death is the mother of forms
is expansion, the wave that stretches & breaks
the feminine mist of plants
not planet & not jewel but fruit

mother of the nomadic tribes, orphan
breasts of wine & belly of bread
delta of arms of desire, water of truth
on a bed of vertigo, truth of water
oven where the dead burn & the living bake
love letter with spelling mistakes
always torn from itself, to speak
while others work is to polish bones

a comb is a harp strummed by the glance
of a little girl born dumb
to see within & through the wall
thought phallus & word womb
language is atonement
an appeasement of the speechless
you are naked like a syllable
like the wine in the glass pitcher
a warm rain of glances, your blouse
of the moon an arm of the sea
the river of language a pause of light
fountain in the night, plunging white

ideas ate the deities, the deities
became ideas, the feminine void
we were content with noise

History of the Future

make the picture in the future
the history of the future
4-line house, 2-line tent

life upon a clown
you are free so what to do
snake, monkey, repurposed lion

without defiance what forms
do you carve?
hemisphere, triangle, slash

if everything needs to be lines
inside or outside the lens
g o g g l e s a r e b l a c k s o

the moon sheds dim light
on a rig, the water beneath the rig
the toe you unsock to toe the water

socking & shoeing are not commutative
asylums, with or without crayons
tattoos lasered or faded

home — what is, who wants, why?
how to move forward (backward)
dream space, every place

better you work outside
the beard, the blind
image to word to string of words

flagged down the baby bird
death is not Zeno's paradox
point & fledge

to love dreams
is to love knowing you can't know
precise & absurd

aspens grow between floor tiles
rush back
as if to prove you're safe

a fox runs out, runs back
stops at the median
lopes toward the traffic light

a laminate beam
spans the high ceiling
bored through in three places

purple cabbage straws
tight-coiled quinoa
orange beans

all day, you said,
you walk from window to window
panning for light

water is sound
green & brown shine
white froth & flow

wet is optional
unless you are the river
rock pebbly, like dried-out sponge

make the garden ammonite
omega, hourglass
flowers orange, yellow, red

make light flow from the hub
along lines of blossom anatomy
charred by, rimmed with

scepters of hollyhock
rosemary, daylily
succulents, artichoke

cosmos wavers
crisscross laid in pavers
thyme to flavor soles

let the central chamber
raise a mesh-clad tent
coral snake undulant

the antique shop's
white window dressing
of rocker, wedding dress, birdcage

a green-gold deposit
crowns your hair — bird gift
alchemy's prima materia

you found the ceiling
now find the floor, full
& empty are much the same

either you prefer to be elder
or you have no choice
childhood green

rough-barked trees w/
long narrow leaves
spruce, pine, maple, walnut

tattoos articulate crimson
& hard-won blue
cedar, cypress, yew

big-mouth sharks
leap from pools, your dreams
peaceful, collegial

your other half present but evacuated
rowdy dogs & children swarm
the breakage inconsequential

arbitrage, dismissal
spaces moan when you cross them
urban meadow of lupine, of sorrel

accumulate archipelago
red ring rims a spare half moon
one sound, a bird

Cut

Susan pauses
to look
at Blue, to say fondly

Good morning. Her luck
stops at one syllable,
the missing *morning* sucked

airless away, the visible
remnant not Susan,
fast emptying crucible

now requiring dozens
to tend, to mourn, to ask
why this loss

for no good reason.

Sacrifice

*And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his priest and king,
Who make up a heaven of our misery.*
— Blake, *Songs of Experience*

Let's take the child
who tells me her eyes are green & her favorite color pink,
who says she's growing, growing every day now,
who looks like her mother, like her grandmother — me.

Let's take her from daycare
wearing a painting apron made to look like a starched shirt & bow tie,
wearing a mouth stained with berries & peanut butter,
wishing the cat hadn't run out to be killed by a car.

Let's take the child
asleep in her orange stroller, head lolled ninety degrees from vertical,
sweating under a Hello Kitty blanket,
parked under the metal roof behind the unlocked gate.

Let's take the child
asking me for ice cream, for dominoes, for Youtubes of animals —
a mongoose & a snake, lions & hyenas — giving me
her scraped-up arms & legs for lotion, for bandages.

Let's take the child
to the father who waited three wives for this child,
the father who loves her more than anything, the father
she goes to first when weeping.

Let the father take the child
through scorched sand seeded with thistle, strewn with thicket,
swirled by gusts at noon.
Let him lay her down, raise the blade.

Hanukkah Horse

Because she arranges a dozen or more
stuffed animals around the hearth
to warm, because she goes with Mom to a *Star Wars* movie on Christmas Day, because
she comes home to find the horse missing —
last year's Hanukkah gift — because
the stuffie-eating dog likely took it, she searches
indoors, outdoors, shines her flashlight,
crawls on her belly & back — so many tears —
because Dad says, *Remember, Rocko*
gives people gifts, because Grandma says,
Look in Dan's room — come tears of joy because
Grandma! It was right next to Dan's bed!
Chocolate mane where she kissed it.

Vagabonds

Who knows what gender Mom chooses
for me? So often she lies. Dad refuses
to name me Susan. Second try
lands on a thespian, a male Sax,
first name Carol. Is that why
I waffle at female for fifty years?
Google Books reveals that Sax
becomes artistic co-director
& designer — costumes, that's rich —
for Baltimore's Vagabonds, America's
oldest little theater. Sax authors
a play titled *The Legend of King
Aarym and the Ant*. Gender fluid?
He wills me his sapphire ring.

Primary Education

Our fingers scour hollows
dark without inkwells,
our ballpoints ink this year's
dedications. Beneath
hinged lids lie
shallow drawers, slots
where end-to-end
ever-breaking yellow
pencils wait. We stare
into each other's heads.
I wear long hair too
often pulled until
I sharpen my tool, stab
a boy. The hair veiling
his skull turns red.
The school nurse arrives
on rubber soles, canvasses
the student victim's wound,
his mute intimidation.

Atlanta, 1955

The whistle — descending third — meant home.
How wonderfully far that familiar sound
traveled at dusk to children bicycling round
suburban streets yellow with ragweed bloom.
Tonto, Geronimo, wannabe hounds of hell
played hide & seek in half-built houses
pressing on pastures of last-chance cows
fated to fuel Atlanta's urban swell.
Up to the school, down to the pond, zoom
around a corner to the corner store
where no one had coins so our gang
leader stole. We seemed impossibly far
when supper tolled & pronto — hunger pangs.
Oh! There were mothers, whistling us home.

My Going Stays

United packers arrive the day
after high school graduation
to move the family south. Pissed & mislaid
I load my '53 Pontiac —
washed-out blue, cream seats
napped out — back down the drive,
signal right for Van Dien. The route
steers me under the tracks, around the curve
& up the hill to my best friend's house.
What I do next — what I did —
I don't remember. Only my going stays,
part of the canon, I cut my ties
for good, stare beyond the hood,
elbow propped for June sun's rays.

The Way to Begin

a five-mile run or a ten-mile bicycle ride is
as a beautiful relaxed animal, wrists & ankles
loose as laundry bellied with noon breezes.
The first foot down begins the rhythm, down
the road & away, the same rhythm for squats
& crunches, body a drinking bird —

the head dips, thirst sated the tail dips.
Relaxed doesn't mean at rest but every part
in perfect order — warrior two, forward fold,
first position, the breath tuned to the blood
mantra, not what is next, only what is now,
what quiets the heart, slows the blood.

Before that moment I lived every moment
as if I would never die, or as if the truth
that I would die could be ignored because it was
so far ahead. There was no threat,
whereas now death stands there wearing
Susan's face — the moment before

when everything is still possible,
the moment after when everything is over —
to stand forever between these two moments
should not be but is my continuance,
no purpose but to wait, every pointless moment
repeats, every one a little longer.

Touring Egypt

The nest above the garage belongs to a finch.
Mine is the ravaged arm below the pillow —
raised veins, petechiae — dozens.
Ghost today, memory tomorrow,
age deals this unexpected sanction
of intimate loss, the body's lurch
apart.

Oh, for a package tour of Egypt,
vector idly picked to intercept
this slapdash, two-bit lurch
toward derivatives I don't sanction —
rude death, wait for tomorrow.
Impelled to nurture another dozen
(lice & worms fattening the nestlings' pillow)
each spring this blithe finch.

I Wish This Place Were a Meadow

Night's falling, everyone into the van
except the old folks, *Wave bye to Gran.*
Dark or light, she's heading out to walk
her normal round though right off it's out
of whack, sidewalks lead to treehouses
& backyards & wooden gates with locks
she can't climb into or out of or over
so she slithers down a flight
to her lifelong street to head straight
home except now the dark covers
everything, it's happened again, she's lost
her way in a world that doesn't see her face
because she's suddenly old, because
she's not remembered, because the past
yields to a present empty that stays
if you don't count death, death waits.
A stump offers a reasonable place to sit
to wish this place were a meadow
where a horse snuffles, a white owl
hunts, the Milky Way flings its hot
spray into infinitely distant
dark space, guarantees what she can't
know despite astronomers' rant
& rocket ships & satellite jaunts
yet here three lizards scamper
round her feet, here where more & more
she reckons, alone & unaccounted for,
no help, no well wishers.

Two Elders

Two elders tucked in at night — one with a dog, one with a green fleece beside her under the covers as if it were a dog or in her case far more likely the next in a lifelong string of cats, right now she doesn't own one because she's not settled or she can't take on the responsibility or she doesn't want to care that deeply because soon enough whatever or whoever she loves will be gone, the cost of loving is too high given the cost of losing, what does he think in his cold bed, his beloved absent though alive & sleeping alone somewhere else not so far away in miles though you can't measure, not here is not here, is the dog, is the fleece, is the cold floor she fell to, go to sleep, tomorrow you can add it up again, one plus zero is one, zero is zero, whenever one or the other wakes in the night they pick up the phone beside the bed, maybe there's a message, hello, hello out there, good night, good morning.

Mind's Eye

I ask her what I look like when she closes her eyes, & she says, *I can't see you because my eyes are closed*. So I ask her whether she can imagine my face when her eyes are closed, whether she can see me in her mind's eye, & she says, *What's my mind's eye?* I tell her it's not a real eye, instead it's the idea of an imaginary eye inside your head that sees things when your eyes are closed. I ask her again, *Can you see me in your mind's eye?* & she says, *Yes*, & I say, *What do I look like?* & after a short while she says, *Lots of wrinkles & really big eyebrows*. It's not what I expected. It makes me feel peculiar & old, & it comforts me because now I know she sees me when I'm not here.

As a Genre

She likes a man here & there, one in a hundred, but as a genre, she doesn't like them at all because she finds them immoral. That phrase falls out one evening when she's describing her father to a good friend, a woman friend. *He was brilliant*, she says, & *drop dead gorgeous, but morally compromised*, & the words don't leap out but creep, the way speech comes now, not crisp & thrilling as when she was young, but slowly, timorously, as if words know they might not come at all. At lunch with one of the few men she does like, she says *heterogeneous* instead of *heterosexual*, & she says it in a cautious way that prompts him to suggest heterosexual, which she accepts without bothering to apologize.

Enough

Eyes see enough —
what's human & what's not human
enough. Our lungs inhale
clean enough air. Even without wheels
two feet go far enough. As for kin
some is enough. To win a race,
the latest shoes are not
enough, nor does a slip knot
hold long enough. After what our race
has done, animals (once kin)
say, *Enough!* The first wheel
was good enough. The toxins earth inhales
are fatal enough. For humans
enough is never enough.

2 January

Dear Susan,

It's a new year for me without you & without resolve.

I'm anxious because my friend hasn't been receiving my texts. She's Apple, I'm Android. Somehow you & I worked through this challenge.

She didn't receive my holiday greetings or know that my brother had a quadruple bypass, & I didn't know that yesterday her sister died.

Susan, I realize you no longer text. I'm not saying you're better off. I text you, often.

I love you,

Carol

Tall Grass Shivers

Colorado hills where
instead of following the trail around
I shortcut through grass,
the going gets rough,
my pockets fill with seed.
July mid-afternoon suns my back.
I think of snakes,
there could be snakes I think
when a rattler rises above the grass,
body an S, arrowhead
aimed at my chest.
I tiptoe backward thinking
Don't run, the snake is six feet away
& wants nothing to do with me.
Snake eyes watch me stutter-step
toward shorter grass, scramble
up scree back to the trail.
Let snakes own tall grass.
I hike alone because alone means
hiking not conversing,
not recalling or projecting
but sensing — eagle, lichen, snake.
Barbara & I see the moose
staring at us from the bog
ten feet off the trail in Wyoming.
Dog Lucy still as she's ever been.
We stop & look. One murmurs
What should we do? Other says *Walk*
slowly. Moose watches. Dog follows.
Moose, head lowered, chews.

Miswak

Cairo sleuths chew miswak
(tooth-cleaning twigs of *Salvadora persica*)
where Chicago cops smoke
for social ease or oral gratification.
Salvadora oleoides burned & boiled
cures camel mange.
Such remedies & manners
we marshal against our dread.
Imagine a silo filled with explosives —
setting it alight. If not hurricane, tornado,
if not earthquake, fire, the air tattooed
by dawn, by fireworks, gunfire, or bombs.
Chew willow twigs for pain to cease.
Pour wine for the bitter lees.

Leaving Tilcara

We push through the stable gate —
three llamas, two old women, old man,
teenage boy, our guide —
wind through town streets, single lanes
paved in dust, midden of plastic & paper,
metal & rock, dust & house walls
yellow, the few cars idle
as we pass, llama jaws rope bridled,
yarn tasseled, every step a step higher,
round one corner a yellow road
climbs a long slope — pickups, barbed wire,
up & down walkers, housewives sweater clad,
skirts, black shoes, heading for or
finished with today's marketing, wilted
greens feather the mouths of sacks,
motos snarl past children
buttoned in pastel frocks,
thorn trees sing finch & *naranjero*,
a pause at the fork
to celebrate the reach of sky.

Bright Morning

Sky's stripes — gray, blue, & yellow —
mirror the wool-flannel tights
worn for warmth this bright
California morning, the furnace turned to low
sixties at night — as if under mounds
of fleece & billows of comforters
three small girls in one room
could possibly feel a twinge of cold
or wake to consider what numbs us —
mix-ups that muddle taken-for-granted
love. Hurrah for patio chairs outside
& patience to talk through how if not
for you (& you & you & you) none of us
might for this long have survived.

Pond

Water prone to escape
seeks containment
homing pleasure

Lumber up & slither down
the stony grassy bank
turtle's pleasure

Branch tips dabble & leaves drift
played by rains & breezes
dancer's pleasure

Delved by ducks lapped by foxes
skimmed by bats & by my fingers
sampler's pleasure

Vessel of unseen depth
fractal periphery
volume of pleasure

Bottom dweller heaves up
eructing gas & eyeing sunlight
shiver of pleasure

Fish eggs slough to slivers
pearl & blood & silver
newborn pleasure

Pillow of ease beneath
lashed-up splintery planks
summer's pleasure

Faces of house of treeline of sky
colonize a fancied life
dreamer's pain & pleasure

Susan's Last Garden

Lightly scattered
ash, do you
mind soil's
beneficent species?

Beetles, worms,
touch-sensitive
star-nosed moles,
wintering queen bees,
their spring wakenings.

All creatures
smaller than birds,
less colorful, if audible
hardly, & not
particularly musical
or perhaps they are.

Naturally I expect
you will notice
& inform us.

Dear Doublewide

though I found you dirty white
I've brought back your true colors — yellow for *Coreopsis*
I tore out for growing too well, apricot for bristle-mallow,
mauve heart of cactus flower, yellow opuntia
scalloped rainbows, pink glow of slopes
every dawn & dusk, green concrete garden walls,
orange for *Kniphofia* — call it torch lily — pink heart
of bursting fig, blue lavender, blue rosemary, white rose
pink rimmed by mutation.

Dear Doublewide,
remember how I unhinged the front porch gate —
nothing to keep out or keep in. I pretend a reindeer
antlered, leading its mate, peers at the cat through the slider
from a back deck covered in snow. Someday a round
dining room table. Someday mustard chenille to flatter
the loveseat. I play the new piano to dazzle
missing rafters — your ceiling, confess it, is low.

Night Watch

Night watch, not asleep in my bed
I send you into wilderness,
glory of helplessness,
what doesn't make me sad?
Chase a twig & slide
far away from anyone.
Putty shapes a companion
absent though in many ways implied
given all the rearrangement.
Tomorrow before I forget
I'll fumigate the cat.
Old history, hashed until vacant,
confused but alive.
How long for your voice to die?

I Pick Myself Up from the Dust Again

Why not stay here, make my home
the ground, cobwebs crusting my cheeks,
roly polys in & out of my ears & nostrils.
The world of dust is at least as interesting as
online news — more so for the surprises —
not some scrofulous indictable president
but iridescent wonders of the insect kingdom,
dung beasts clacking through pale sand,
articulate feelers sharpening blades on
mineral duff, the infinitesimally small
spoor of ants, termite towers, rodent tunnels,
scraps of leaf dropped by constantly grinding
mandibles, the tragedy of creatures that
feed all day for a chance at survival.
This ant between my fingers, under my toe —
what attention might I spend to preserve it?

Auld Yin

Heir to a tortoise stove
from mongrel kin
I do my own charring —
slow-roast my jiggot,
stew my hough
& call it home rule.
I dree my weird
as an auld yin should.
I canna play fool
nor cop on a swick.
Nay, but for the wee tot
I'm no mair a-larking,
hame in a but & a ben
with myself to love.

We Refugees

Cheaper than lock & key, a chowkidar
guards our door. He's ragged, poor, menial
kin to fruit peels we toss in the street
yet he defends our home, we, the non-
pariahs so luminous, bindis scarlet
between our eyes, brilliant silks that bind us,
shades & smells of turmeric, chilis,
asafoetida. He sits, his heart
an apple wizened to a frame for pips.
Pledged to our stone stoop he waves
favored callers to our baubled inside.
Monsoons don't muddy these parquet floors
or swamp the beds, we women marooned,
we refugees, our bruises, our spells.

Left Handed

I go through Susan's backup CDs to the year when she wrote nothing but fiction. I copy the titles of her work onto Pat's bed sheets (they are blue) twelve titles in groups of three, print them carefully in black ink on the blue sheets & wonder if the words will ever wash out. When Susan's writing group next meets I come to the session wearing Susan's clothes, a pair of slacks worn backward & a coarse-knit tweedy sweater. I explain I'm rewriting Susan's work from that year starting with a title I don't right now remember. I haven't read the work, but the names of the characters come to me & seem familiar to the people in her writing group, who are all much younger. I sit in her chair, which is a child's desk & right handed even though Susan & I are both left handed. The others sit in desks to my left & right & behind me. We write quietly between meals, & all of this happens & none of this is true.

Bullseye

Driving home I rue what I've done —
ruddy grapes prised from their stems,
tart flesh juiced between my teeth,
bottle of cold beer a welcome balm.
Four ticks the women tease loose,
troublesome barbs lodged in skin,
the horror of Lyme a most terrible
future, fables victims tell, mandibles
inject, leeches press to fragile skin.
Sleep cuts me loose —
cotton, dark, arm under pillow, balm —
I wake at midnight, eels at my teeth,
the ghost ship is sinking, stern to stem.
Guilty! Scuttle me! Be done!

Warp

Down a black hole is where I go
to bank the fire, make it flare,
the light creates this extraordinary halo

round each & every friend qua foe.
Blinkered, second geared
down a black hole is where I go.

Outside's a world of TV snow,
inside, the haunts of hibernating bears
where light creates this extraordinary halo.

I don't look up or say hello
except to white rabbits, pair by pair
down a black hole is where we go,

the answer to everything a simple no.
Stepping a deep woods trail, a deer
creates the light of this extraordinary halo

pierced by a poisoned arrow
sirens & furies fired there.
Down a black hole is where I go.
The light creates this extraordinary halo.

Father, She Says

The two men are priests in black gaucho hats, ankle-length robes, *I'm not Christian*, she says & leads them back to her house, she's making tea, but the young one demurs, he wants a drink, *that half bottle of red*, she thinks & washes two glasses before she pours. Her girlfriends arrive & seeing wine won't take tea, soon the wine's gone, *now she must buy more*, the young one offers to go with, he takes her hand, it's carnival week, the meaty stink of caged animals fires her. *Father*, she says & kisses him.

It's Invisible

It's sitting on the shelf next to my bed.
I've never eaten it.
Surely my mother warned me to stay away from it
& everything like it.
On rainy days it smells like a ripe tomato.
It's ovoid I'm told by those who know.
It cries out when the wind batters the house at night.
It's irreverent, woolly, larger in summer than spring.
It's in training. It lies in wait.
The cat watches it the way it watches
the cold iron standing on the ironing board
in my mother's kitchen.
Often I forget it for the better part of a week,
too absorbed by children & work,
by the caws of ravens strutting the deck,
garbage trucks piercing dawn's quiet,
weed whackers & leaf blowers on Tuesdays.
For two decades I thought I'd lost it
far as I'd strayed from someone else's story.
I can't say I missed it
though I'd find myself searching
through luggage coated with attic dust,
through back corners of deep closets.
I once peered down a duck's throat.
It returned the year I woke each morning
convinced I'd failed to take the drug
prescribed to cure the illness I didn't know I had.
Medicine cabinet empty, water glass full.
I knew it was back by the streak of sunlight
pebbling the threshold with silver stars,
mouse tracks in the bathroom sink.

Ablutions, contortions, orations
are required to placate its rage
but I don't. I let it flail.
Let the future contain it.

Three Ring

Palms up clowns rush
the children. Panicked they dash
about, scream & slap & fall.
Yawning tigers swivel on stools.
Bit in mouth an aerialist swings.
Pinpoint in the center ring
a top-hatted tuxedoed dwarf
flacks a whip, chews a cigar.
Midnight sharp the ropes ripple,
the big tent slumps to a puddle.
A fortune teller sorts her cards —
empress devil hermit moon
lovers — last comes the fool
white dog nipping her arse.

Crazed

My car stolen, my bedroom trashed,
still in pajamas, no one blinks a lash
at my chattels traded for someone's
basket of dirty clothes. Moshe's
lounging on the stair. *Moshe, What?*
He smirks, the woman beside him nuzzles
closer. Roderick counsels patience. I rage,
hurl Levis out the door. Roderick's draped
not dressed — I glance, he accuses
though all I see is elastic-jockstrapped hip.
Police in the kitchen, Esther missing her head.
We rush to the boats, they're crazed with ice.
If you want your gift, go now, Ben advises.
I bail. The truck nails it, driverless, red.

Two Friends

Susan & Les
fell over each other
dying — same week,
same day I didn't see
how I would come to
the other side of.

Both read my poems
whatever I sent.
Wrote their poems
back to me.

Surely they're still
reading, sending,
saying to each other,
For gosh sake.
Can't she get over it?

Susan. Les.
For gosh sake.
No. I can't.

Lost Plane

No one really — women
with children flying home,
bankers in wrinkled suits,
a postal worker,
first-year Bollywoods,
a highly-trained crew.

The children brightly decked
pausing, peering
fore & aft, up to a face
to be sure they're still
part of the same people.

Skyrocket passage,
pilot, no pilot,
lost world.

Young Cat Singing

Under my feet the young cat is singing
for three meals a day.

Her commentary
keeps her from feeling merely secondary
as I'm slicing, cooking, washing, wringing.
She suffers,

knowing I'm always bringing
food to the table, its surface a sanctuary
where she's not allowed.

It's scary
when I yell, so she's behind me clinging
upside down to wooden rails, her pain
allayed

by somersaults. Thrice daily prayers
she offers up to convince me to give her part
of a chop or a chicken thigh, a chance to clean
my plate.

She tries to pretend no one cares
she's starving. She sings from her heart.

Tree Frogs

Nights in Hawaii are black, & when the breeze starts from the south, brushes against ferns until the frond tips bristle, I know rain is coming, distant thunder, a few fat drops, a susurrus of needle-thin shafts, an itch, a long swallow, crescendos to pianissimo, whisk broom & push broom, all night weaving cocoon after cocoon. Tree frogs cling as sap to bark & sing of rain. Mornings break to rain still falling. I climb into rain gear, the air too warm for layers between my skin & the yellow slick, search for boots left all night under the carport roof, tip out the toad (too dull with sleep to hop away), slide my toes in, slosh past flowering ixora, unfurling hapu, pig trough, gurgling ducks, wide-eyed rabbits, a thousand fish kissing the underside of the pond's shine. Though sky hangs low & gray, each egg frees an oversized orange sun that crackles in brown butter, spills onto brown toast.

Ode to Fire & Bread

I glance at
the sourdough starter
risen all night to
a frothy mass.
I open the stove door,
flatten yesterday's
ashes under
a cardboard base,
crinkle brown paper,
layer pine cones
crisscrossed
with mossy twigs,
a half-rotted
redwood chunk,
curl of oak bark.
One match fires
two corners.
Minutes pass
before flame
spears through
the bark arch,
flows up & across
the metal
firebox roof.
Careful not to
tumble the pyre
I add a log.
Sit, warm,
drink tea,
ready myself
to measure &
knead the bread.

Indulgence

Never if I can help it do I think
of you squinting as cigarette smoke

swirls the wrong way between sips
of evening's first martini, step

toward grim inebriation. How she
stands it I don't know, cheeks

red with amphetamines, the one cigarette
she smokes, she says, to cooperate.

Dinner a formal minefield we children
test on polished silver & Tiffany

plate, fidgeting yet knowing what
you require: neat, clean, quiet.

What I learn is how to eat
everything — liver & kidneys & sweet-

bread, anchovies, oysters, roast goose
for Christmas, herring, antipasto,

well-done lamb, asparagus from jars,
canned potatoes, hard-boiled egg with caviar.

So many years you've been gone.
I admit, I share your taste for gin.

Main

```
if
  gain
  exceeds margin
    recalibrate
else
  run longer
for
  night after night
  'til death

if
  seemingly full moon
    startle awake
    relieved
    accumulate
else
  slumber deep
  steeper

return unknown
```


Our Susan

She will not grow old, our Susan,
grow feeble, grow dim, nor crumble
as do eggshells or bread, nor fox
like a page in a timeworn book.
She fell the entire distance from
on her game to out of the game
forever. Doesn't know our pain.
Left us to carry the torch, pick
through the pieces. Outside the wren's
gone quiet, the blue gray. It's set
to rain. Nothing better than rain
to ease the ache, put words to page.
Sing of love, sing of all the times
we sang together, music & rhyme.

The Answer to Every Question Is Fishing

Weather is either good or bad for fishing.
Cages anchored in fjords corral fish,
long wooden racks air-dry fish,
awnings fray over tables spilling fish,
the whitest building in town freezes fish into bricks,
ships dock at the pier to load fish,
on Independence Day, the café serves dinner —
grilled halibut to all who pay.

Maggi was to take us out, catch our dinner.
Instead, we drank coffee & didn't speak of fish.
Then the boat capsized —
everyone into the sea.
No one rescued Maggi.
O Maggi. O coffee. O sea.

Tomfoolery

Bang, for a moment you're nearly dead,
done in by your own tomfoolery,
saved merely because we're American-girl bred

to soldier on despite your cartoonery.
Trees have bled
since Ovid's version of Dryopery

as male gods have relentlessly fed
their unquenchable appetite for roebuckery
on every virgin misled

into their libidinous huggermuggery.
Dante spins a thread
of jabberwockery

whiffling from the maw of Fred-
erick the Second's castoffery
hypothesizing scorn & envy could be shed

by suicide. Spare me the nincompoopery
of that dunderhead. Instead,
let's focus on VIP poltroonery

whereby Virgil petitions to be led
by Nessus across River Blood to the tree nursery.
Why don't a rapist rot in the foul bed

he's made? No doubt, it's garden-variety chicanery
sowed in hell. I've heard said
that Boston beanery

mobsters to Chicago wardheelers are wed
then jammed into the upholstery
of airplane overheads,

a species of cocoonery
due to nothing more than Dante's being too rarely read,
a six-pack of lampoonery

God-spel.

The Periscope

I take a personality test online:
Would you rather go to a party or a library?
Is fastidiousness a sign of mental illness
or proof of a Christian upbringing?
Should you bring a dog to a funeral?
What part of a Smithfield ham
composes an allegretto?
A better world would favor odd numbers —
one eye, three legs, eleven tentacles.
The periscope is made of cardboard
& has never heard of a submarine.
A submarine is a drowned banana.
The banana is one spine of a sea urchin
found only in the South China Sea.
Lying here on a blanket in April sun
I watch crabs sidewalk
across the hot sand. Every sixth crab
will be eaten by a seagull
except in the mirror world
where every seventh seagull
will be eaten by a giant clam.
The mirrors whisper softly after midnight
what to reveal in the morning.
Confections on the scrambled eggs.
Eggshells seated at the opera.
The highchair sawing off its legs
for globes that spin.

The One You Spend Your Life with Is Dying

Cautious, regretful you kill
the invisible living child
no one else knows.
Others only wonder.
The secret heart
can't be fathomed,
then changes its mind.
Fey & shameless
the body declined & mourned
doesn't stop to putrify.
Instead it rises,
clamors for reinclusion.
What to do?
Your grief spent,
your passion clean,
shelved & folded.
How to shed its other season,
shake & air it, drench
& land it, put on
its wornout clothes.
You're wasted, wan
with self-protection,
dull with abnegation,
weary of saintliness.
Or say it, freedom!
After desolation
how can the heart open?
What space, if any
pines for resurrection?

Individual Parts May Be Salvaged

Alone in the house after my death
the robot powers down my phone,
straightens my cuffs,
wipes the fluids oozed after my fall.
While its moving parts tidy,
its cortex sends notifications —
Ben, your mother has fallen & can't get up.
Matt, it's already too late,
but get in your car and drive down here now.
Esther, your daughter's finally on her way to join you.
She hasn't changed
so if you want to maintain your peace & quiet
you might want to descend to a lower circle
or petition Beatrice for an overdue pardon.
My neurons, my ligatures
start to unweave.
My life of reconstructed memories
shrivels to stories soon to be no longer told.
To my granddaughter, I give my tidiness,
to my younger son, my zen.
May the annual library sale profit from my books.
Friends, my undying devotion dies
though I remember every friend I ever had
even if I unfriended them.
Now I'm a dead-letter email.
The robot scans for breached perimeters,
an ill-adjusted thermostat,
running water, unwatered plants,
a kettle boiling dry.
The robot doesn't know
it's reached end of life too.

Recycling an intact elder care robot
has been against the law since 2025
though individual parts may be salvaged.
It's the impossibility
of securely erasing data structures
that sentences the robot's cortex
& sensory appendages
to be rendered.
It livestreams my missing pulse,
opens up for the paramedics.
This robot has been awfully good to me,
brilliant at finding my glasses
& prompting me to medicate.
I don't suppose she misses me.
I sometimes called her Rose.

Not to Be Nothing

Ten plus ten fingers tapping.
You scanning an armadillo
while I snapshot a sudden bloom.
How we call to each other
& never fail to respond.
So often we post our poems
within moments
thousands of miles apart.

This is what I now know
not to be nothing,
to be the something
I hold closest & most dear.
Gentle woman moored fast,
rock softly in my life.
My toes & fingers cling to
what is not empty space,
what is my solid ground.

List of Acknowledgments

none

[end of ms]